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ABSTRACT

It is a misguided and wasteful effort to try to separate out the teaching of language arts from the teaching of social studies and to wage war over which subject is most deserving of children's time. Instead, there is real power to be gained from teaching from a combined language arts-social studies perspective that shares similar goals and values similar experiences. Such a perspective involves more than simply acknowledging that reading, writing, speaking and listening occur within the context of history or social science. It means allowing children to grapple with disciplinary concerns in an intellectually stimulating way, learning to use language in order to develop historical meaning. In recent years, three important points of confluence have developed between the two disciplines, each of which presents difficult pedagogical issues that may be documented through transcripts of actual classroom dialogues. First, both disciplines have recognized the importance of authenticity--providing students with experiences that match what practitioners do. Second, both disciplines believe in interpretive communities as a means of generating knowledge. The function of these groups is to allow students to refine their understandings and to build on the comments of others. Third, a major thrust in both of these disciplines is the cultivation of student responses; both are interested in developing empathetic responses in children. (Contains 14 references.) (TB)

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READING, WRITING, AND TALKING ABOUT THE PAST

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READING, WRITING, AND TALKING ABOUT THE PAST

While language arts and social studies are assumed to be natural partners in the elementary school, the relationship is by no means a well defined one. Instead, there is the lurking suspicion that either subject might, if just given the chance, devour the other and find the meal quite satisfying.

This position has been most firmly stated by Alleman and Brophy (1991) who caution that activities suggested in popular social studies series which claim to integrate social studies with other subjects too often "either (a) lack educational value in any subject or (b) promote progress toward significant goals in another subject but not in social studies" (p. 2). Such activities, they continue, can "amount to intrusion of language arts ... into social studies time and, thus, are better described as invasion of social studies..." (p. 2).

In contrast to this militaristic view of language arts victoriously stamping out the social studies, Walmsley (1991) has quietly put forth the bombshell of an idea that if only content subjects such as social studies were properly taught, there would be no need for language arts at all--at least not as a separate subject with its own agenda. Walmsley raises the possibility of a victorious social studies allowing language arts to peacefully co-exist within its borders. He writes:

> Could language arts instruction be completely integrated within subject areas? This is a radical proposal, given that it is the subject areas themselves that have been almost eradicated from elementary school by an ever-spreading language arts curriculum. Yet if we take seriously the principle...that reading and writing are language processes, not subject areas, then why not fully integrate them within the study of content? In such an approach, the language arts program is abolished as a separate entity, its time being reallocated to the subject areas. (p. 155)

As a participant in both camps--trained in language education but with experience teaching and researching in social studies--I believe that the primary reason for these turf wars is that language arts and social studies share strikingly similar rather than different concerns. These concerns are becoming more crucial and more demanding of our attention as we come to grips with implementing what is referred to variously as thematic teaching, in-depth studies, and inquiry learning in a setting that has largely up to now been a "sit up straight, no talking, keep-your-eyes-on-your-own-paper" kind of place. In this paper I will discuss what I see as an emerging common agenda that unites social studies and language arts teaching, an agenda which I believe provides an intriguing basis for research and practice.

The Common Agenda of Language Arts and Social Studies

Reading research in social studies, one encounters ideas that could just as easily have emerged from language arts research. Three such prominent ideas are (1) the need for learning that is discipline specific, (2) the role of interpretive communities in developing meaning, and (3) the impact of reader response, which for historians includes assessing significance of historical evidence. Taken together, these ideas form the basis of placing the challenge of sense making, in history as well as every other subject, directly in the hands of students.

Discipline Specific Learning

Both language arts and social studies educators have recognized the importance of authenticity--providing students with experiences that match what practitioners do. While the use of writing workshops and literature study groups has largely become accepted in theory and is gaining ground in practice, we are only beginning to deal with authenticity in the teaching of history.

Authenticity in the teaching of history means doing what historians do. This means seeing history as a human construction, an interpretation that is subject to change. It means creating an interpretation that is intentional or purposeful, that answers today's questions and deals with today's crucial topics. It means using a wide array of information including music, poetry, and art as well as written documents.

Instruction in history has trailed behind language arts in providing authentic experiences because of students' reluctance to embrace the tentative nature of history. Marcy Singer Gabella (1994), for example, refers to the "reverence" of students not only for the textbook but also for the teacher's explanation of it. In fact, the eleventh grade students she observed rejected poetry, art, and music as credible sources at all.

Failure to question the textbook is well documented at all levels of schooling, but it is particularly disturbing to see how early it begins. McKeown and Beck refer to "students' failure to grapple with text" (1994, 19) which prompted them to develop a strategy they call "Questioning the Author." This strategy shows elementary school children how to read with "a reviser's eye," questioning sources that are not written clearly, looking for implicit ideas, and suggesting possible revisions.

Can students have authentic, discipline specific experiences as they study history? My experience shows that they can. Fifth graders who spent time studying Eleanor Roosevelt, reading primary and secondary sources, examining photographs and films, looking and newspaper accounts and so forth, were able to suggest their own interpretations of the meaning of her life. One group wrote:

> Eleanor Roosevelt's life was different from anyone else's because she started off with a bad childhood and

as she grew older it became much more exciting. Eleanor set an example to all people because you could start off with the most horrible life and then wind up an idol. (quoted in Zarnowski, 1988, 27)

A sixth grade class studying World War II, posed their own questions for research. One child wrote a question-and-answer book that includes the following excerpt:

> What would have happened if the bomb was dropped on Germany?
>
> I asked some of my classmates what they thought would have happened if the bomb had been dropped on Germany and this is what some of them said:
>
> Sergey: After Germany regrouped, they would conquer lots of countries and gain back power and then when it was time to attack, the United States might lose.
>
> Chrissy: New leaders would be rising and everyone would go to war.
>
> Nadia: Most of Germany's cities would be destroyed.
>
> Nicole: Germany might not attack the U.S. because the United States could use the atomic bomb again.

A sixth grader asked to consider whether George Washington was prepared to become the Commander-in-Chief of the Revolutionary Army suggested he was not. Among the reasons she offered was the following:

George was lacking in self-confidence because women put him down. You need somebody who believes in himself so his soldiers would believe in him. It was a new job. He never was commander-in-chief and he was like a bird just learning to fly.

Clearly, children can, when given the chance to sift through evidence and think about it, offer original interpretations. However, such interpretations raise an intriguing question. What are we to do about these interpretations when they are naive and ill-formed? In Peter Sexias words, "What happens to the process of education in the empowered hands of 12-year-old deconstructionists" (1993, 311)? Will children's interpretations change over time even if we don't intervene? How much intervention is acceptable?

Interpretive Communities

A second idea shared by language arts and social studies educators is that of interpretive communities as a means of generating knowledge. For language arts instruction, the interpretive community often takes the form of literature discussion groups or peer response groups dealing with each other's writing. The function of these groups is to allow students to refine their understandings and to build upon the comments of others.

For social studies educators, the origin and function of the interpretive community is different. Because most

historians have given up on the idea that a completely objective, non-biased history is possible, the most promising alternative to "every man being his own historian" or the relativist position, is the interpretative community of scholars (Novick, 1988). The current best opinion of scholars serves as a guide to understanding the past, but it is at best a provisional guide subject to critical scrutiny. The tentative nature of these beliefs has been compared to a boat "in high wind and shoal water, [where] even a light anchor is vastly superior to none at all" (Haskell quoted in Seixas, 1993, 308).

However, the elementary school classroom community differs markedly from the professional historical community, most noticeably because of the limited historical background of children. They have read comparatively little and do not have a fund of knowledge to draw upon. They may raise legitimate questions, but the answers they offer are often naive and limited. In addition, children are less rigorous than scholars in their questioning of each other.

A few examples will illustrate this. Two years ago, I observed a class where students were divided into groups that were studying various social problems such as the environment, immigration, war and peace, human rights, and poverty. Even after a considerable amount of time reading, journal writing, and discussing, one child brought this journal entry about a book she was reading to the group for discussion:

> This book is about the greenhouse effect, carbon dioxide and stuff like that. It tells you what could happen if we don't stop [producing] acid rain, using energy, polluting the air, and burning trees. I don't understand what global warming means. I thought it was <u>global warning</u>. The book doesn't tell. This book makes me feel kind of scared of what's going to happen to the world. (quoted in Zarnowski, 1993, 37)

A group can empathize with her fears, and even help her clear up her misunderstandings, and this is a good thing to do. But the ensuing conversation generated by this excerpt does not match the scholarly tentativeness of putting forth original ideas.

A similarly naive response occurred when the group of children discussing immigration during the early 1900s considered the poor treatment received by immigrants:

> Paula: I was reading about the Irish. If America is the land of freedom, why are immigrants treated so badly?
>
> Bruce: They don't shoot them.
>
> Teacher: Paula's point was that they were badly treated.
>
> Ellen: The same thing happened to the Chinese.
>
> John: The West Indians--it was the same.
>
> Teacher: Is there a pattern here?
>
> (quoted in Zarnowski, 1993, 38)

It is only through the intervention of the teacher that the children even began to consider similarities in the treatment of various immigrant groups and to abandon the notion that since the groups weren't murdered their treatment was acceptable.

Not only in language arts, but also in social studies education, (Levstik, 1990, 1993; Seixas, 1993) researchers have called for teacher mediation in order to focus on alternative perspectives and suggest criteria for evaluating information and interpretation.

Such an approach is clearly needed, but it raises questions. Given the limitations of the interpretive communities in the elementary school, how valuable are their efforts as historians? Just how far should teachers go to bridge the gap between professionals and amateurs?

Reader Response

A major thrust in the teaching of language arts in the elementary school is the cultivation of children's responses to literature with a particular emphasis on nurturing the aesthetic (See for example, Zarrillo, 1991). This has been a fortunate bonanza for social studies teaching, since forming empathetic ties with people who lived in the past is one of the primary ways of enabling children to connect with history.

Several years ago when I worked with children who read about Eleanor Roosevelt, I noticed that they often wrote sympathetic and empathetic responses in their journals. They

recorded feelings of admiration:

> Eleanor gave much of her time to make this a much better world for all people. I am very proud of her. I would also give my life away to help the poor and the ones who need help still. (quoted in Zarnowski, 1990, 36)

Many also shared feelings of joy or sorrow:

> I feel sorry for her that she is so ugly, but I really wish I was her. She had a good heart, but was ugly. (quoted in Zarnowski, 1990, 36)

However, when dealing with history, reading for information is as crucial as reading for affect. As Judith Langer has pointed out, "both the horizon of possibilities [reading from an aesthetic stance] and point of reference thinking [reading from an informational stance] have their place in history...classes" (1992, p. 6). However, we are still in the process of determining how to achieve an appropriate balance.

Reading for historical information involves more than accumulating an assortment of facts. It requires dealing with the question of <u>significance</u>--evaluating the importance of the steady flow of information (Seixas, 1994). It means posing questions such as these: Is this new information important because it has vast explanatory power? Does it

provide a framework for assessing and dealing with current problems? Does this information provide us with lessons that can help us live our lives today?

There is evidence that children welcome the opportunity to deal with questions of significance. When asked to write about the treatment of Native Americans during the settlement of the American West, a sixth grader put her readings into a larger historical context which incorporated the present. She wrote:

> I have always been against two different religions, colors, or any other different kinds of people fighting with each other, but as I start to look around people are prejudiced in their different ways. This kind of prejudice has been going on for many years, and I doubt it is going to change now. In the case of this book [Children of the Wild West], the white people thought that the Indians were their property. They treated them as if they were born to obey them. The thing that really bugs me is why did they have to go through all of this because of color of their skin or the religion they practiced. I think it is sad how they treated them. And if that were me, I would not be able to live with myself.

In spite of the fact that I have seen naive assessments of significance--for example, a biographaphy of Ben Franklin

that dealt almost exclusively with the sibling rivalry between Ben and his older brother--writing such as seen in the excerpt above is very encouraging. It suggests that children can use history as a frame of reference for understanding current events and that they do have a basis for selecting significant information.

It also suggests that if we want to avoid hearing the question frequently posed by children to their teachers--"Why do we have to know this?"--we ought to beat them to the punch by posing a much more challenging question to them--"Do we really have to know this?" How would knowing this help us live our lives better? Their answers--responses to history--would then be the basis of continuing dialogue.

The Power of a Language Arts-Social Studies Perspective

It is a misguided and wasteful effort to try to separate out the teaching of language arts from the teaching of social studies and to wage war over which subject is most deserving of children's time. Instead, there is real power to be gained from teaching from a combined language arts-social studies perspective that shares similar goals and values similar experiences. Such a perspective involves more than simply acknowledging that reading, writing, speaking and listening occur within the context of history or social science. It means allowing children to grapple with disciplinary concerns in an intellectually stimulating way, learning to use language in order to develop historical meaning.

There are a number of ways in which this can be done. I have worked with children who, assuming the role of biographers, dealt with the same problems biographers routinely face: (1) developing coherence or finding an organizing principle within historical data, (2) using non-chronological approaches to writing, (3) considering the interaction between a person's life and times, and (4) considering whether fictional accounts are appropriate means of helping readers envision the past. They have done this while writing original biographies.

I have seen children pose original questions and answer them through research, collaborative dialogue, and ultimately write their own books based on formats found in children's trade books. I have watched children compose poetry about people as diverse as Columbus, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Sitting Bull, dealing simultaneously with historical interpretation and poetic form.

During my most recent classroom study, I observed sixth graders write informational storybocks about childhood experiences during the settlement of the American West. To do this they were required to develop an original narrative and, therefore, deal with the thoughts and feelings of the characters that peopled their stories. At the same time, they were required to draw upon the factual knowledge they had acquired through reading, journal writing, and discussion. As a result, they dealt with aesthetic and efferent sides to history.

Some examples will show how children accomplished this. One student wrote the following mix of fact, fiction, and feeling about the losses involved in traveling West in a covered wagon:

> It was was hard to climb the mountain. We had to throw away some heavy furniture, and one of the cows fell over a cliff. It was terrible.

Another student, writing about the boring nature of children's chores, probably tells us more about her own attitude than her character's:

> I continued on with my chores, helping my mother dry the meat,...knitting, washing, and cleaning. Cleaning and washing are the two jobs I dislike doing. I dislike them because they are boring, too much cleaning involved, and they are smelly.

A third student showed her knowledge of children's feelings of vulnerability and dependence on their parents:

> I know there aren't any doctors, but I think I am a good substitute. I can't believe father got a snakebite. This shouldn't happen to him. It's not fair! I begin to cry since I know Papa is our only hope to live.

As these informational storybooks were completed and shared, the children discussed major ideas in both social studies and literature. When discussion tilted in favor of social studies, children dealt with the concepts of change and continuity. They discussed how childhood has changed since the 1800s, and how it has remained the same. For example, after recalling the various chores children performed during the 1800s, (i.e., weeding the garden, feeding the animals, tending the livestock, plowing and planting, hauling water, cooking, and cleaning), students noted that these chores were "very different than they are today," that some chores "would be a gross out for us 90s kids," and that these people "had a much harder life than we do." They also commented on what they termed "forced change." Students reported feeling saddened and startled to learn that Native Americans had been forced to change their whole way of life. One student wondered "why the pioneers never considered how they would like it if that happened to them."

Several children commented on aspects of childhood that remained the same. Comparing themselves to children on the frontier, students mentioned engaging in such similar activities as "helping my parents," "playing with things I make," and "celebrating holidays".

When the discussion tilted in favor of literature, the students discussed the impact of literary retellings. They talked about the feelings that a story evoked in them. Like

children growing up in the West in the 1800s, they recalled feeling frightened and afraid when a parent was sick. They discussed feeling helpless and vulnerable.

The children discussed how the story form itself might affect their understanding of history. Several children noted that a switch of narrators--a father telling the story instead of his daughter--would make a big difference, since each narrator would value and be privileged to different information. A daughter would talk about school, friends, and siblings, while a father would be concerned with providing for the family and doing the work this entails.

When asked how informational storybooks would be different if they turned them into reports, children noted that they would not only lose the dialogue within the story, they would lose the story itself. "It wouldn't say feelings," one student commented, "just facts." In short, by writing and discussing informational storybooks, students not only learned about the past, they also considered how a literary retelling of history influences learning--a dual persective.

I am convinced that there is a common agenda in the teaching of language arts and social studies. It is an agenda that values time spent accumulating information, critically evaluating its significance, and engaging in knowledge construction that is put forth in a larger social arena. In simpler terms, it is an agenda that begins by asking two powerful questions: What happened? So what? and then using

all of our combined wisdom to put forth some answers.

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